

COLNAGHI



A Mesopotamian Spectacle Idol

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Mesopotamian

Middle Uruk, ca. 3,000 B.C.

Spectacle Idol

Marble

h. 10 cm

3 7/8 in.

Provenance

With Didier Wormser;

Acquired from the above by Robert Blanchet (1921-2009), 2 May 1998, inventory no. 421;

Collection of G. Blanchet, by descent.

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Spectacle idols such as this were manufactured in Mesopotamia in the 4th and 3rd millennia B.C. They are associated with the much more common eye idols which appear in great quantities at temples contemporaneously with spectacle idols, especially the so-called “Eye Temple” at Tell Brak, where hundreds of small idols were fixed into the mortar of the temple itself. Located off a tributary of the Euphrates River, Tell Brak was one of the first large cities in Mesopotamia that would later serve as an administration center for the Akkadian Empire. However, even during the Chalcolithic era, the region of Northern Syria was an extremely important center for trade, linking the civilizations of Babylon with the mountainous areas of modern-day Turkey.

Little is known about eye idols and their name derives solely from their appearance. Shaped like a weight surmounted by two eyes, much scholarly conjecture has been proposed about their meanings. These so-called “eye idols” are seen by some scholars most likely as votive figurines of worshipers, a type of votive object which developed over time throughout Mesopotamia into a large number of figurative idols, all of them notable for their accentuated eyes. It is noted that the state of open eyes on a religious idol symbolized devotion to the gods. Thus these stone eye idols might have been some of the earliest devotional objects from the Near East.

Although spectacle idols are much rarer than their eye-idol counterparts, it is generally accepted that the morphological similarities between the two point to a common symbolism as an abstract representation of a divinity at a time when gods were rarely represented in human guise. However, several variant theories have been postulated. W. Andrae in his book, *Die Ionische Säule*, relates them to the sacred cattle byres represented on Uruk seals and monuments, as well as to the picture of shrines at that period. In any case, the fact that they were excavated from temple sites or sanctuaries suggests a connection with cultic or religious practices.

For a recent discussion of spectacle idols, see Bielińska D. 'A Spectacle Idol from Tell Abu Hafur (North Syria) and Its Possible Function', *Études et Travaux* 29, 2016, pp. 33–41.

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